Gandy Dancer Archives

Volume 6 | Issue 1 Article 6

12-1-2017

Chicken Feet

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The dim sum restaurant is noisy and lively in the morning, like the city it is in. The servers wear white cloth hats and white aprons, wheeling around squeaky metal carts filled with bamboo steamers, declaring the names of the dim sum in their cart to every table they pass by. The tables are filled with chatty families, relatives, and old friends; among the crowd are my parents, my two younger sisters, and I.

A pair of hands swiftly set down a bamboo steamer onto the middle of the off-white table cloth. The orangey-red chicken feet stick out of the light brown steamer, glimmering under the hot steam that brushes my cheek. One by one, the other steamers join the chicken feet dish: shrimp dumplings with thick, translucent skin and a softly-glowing pink center; yellow-skinned *siu mai* with large shrimps and tiny fish embryo placed on top of each one; rectangular, silky white *cheung fun* that easily slip through chopsticks and flop back into the soy sauce; white, fluffy *cha siu bao*s filled with red and sticky, sweet and salty *cha siu*.

I'm the first one in my family to pick up a savory claw with my chopsticks. I bite off the talons one or two at a time, sucking the skin and fat off the small, roundish bones that I roll around in my mouth, the bones getting cleaner with every roll, every suck. I push out the soft cartilage between bones using my tongue and front teeth. The action comes as naturally as the enjoyment; my parents have told me stories of my toddler years, chewing on a chicken bone in my sleep while I was still in my high chair at the dinner table. I lean forward to spit out the light, gray bones onto the restaurant's porcelain plate; they are now clean and smooth to my satisfaction, and collect on my plate like fairies' dumbbells, or souvenirs of an unknown past.

The Chinese have many different chicken feet dishes—savory, spicy, sweet and sour, sour and spicy. They're served with brown sauce, red sauce, vinegar,

and steamed or boiled, you name it. The chicken feet at dim sum places, which is where most people in Hong Kong eat their chicken feet, are usually first deep fried and then simmered in sweet soy sauce, garlic, and fermented black soybeans. The name of this type of chicken feet at dim sum places literally translates to "phoenix claws." In Thai restaurants, they are typically marinated in clear sweet and sour sauce with chili peppers, usually too spicy for me to eat more than three in a row without having to chug a glass of ice water. Chinese chicken feet are typically softer, while Thai chicken feet tend to be chewier. Like Jamaicans, Chinese people also make chicken feet soup. The chicken feet are cooked with white beans, peanuts, and sometimes other vegetables until the ingredients almost fall apart. These are the easiest chicken feet to suck on—the fat and skin practically slip off the bone onto your tongue.

I remember watching a TV program called *Blue Peter* in the living room of our apartment in Scotland when I was around eight and seeing people roast large, furry, long-legged spiders over a fire, squatting under palm trees and eating the black, hairy creatures. I can't remember if I felt more intrigued or grossed out. When my Korean best friend from Scotland told me she loved eating caterpillars and that Scottish people were ignorant for thinking it was gross, I agreed with her that caterpillars were so good even though I thought it was gross too. I had never eaten an insect in my life (at least to my knowledge) and I had no idea that anyone ate caterpillars, but I wanted to be on her team of non-ignorant people. Scottish people had no idea how to appreciate nature's gifts like we did.

I didn't know my favorite Scottish dish, haggis, was made of sheep innards wrapped in sheep stomach, until after my family and I had left Scotland for Hong Kong and I Googled it when I grew nostalgic. By that time, though, my family and I were in Hong Kong eating ox tripe and pig ears and pig blood curd (which is basically a savory, dark brown-red jello-cube made of pig's blood…its name sounds better in Chinese: 豬紅, which literally translates into *pig red*), so well-seasoned sheep innards and oatmeal wrapped in a lining of stomach was nothing atrocious.

Food historians generally agree that haggis was a popular peasant food. "Encasing hard to cook cuts like lungs and intestines along with undesirable muscle meats like liver and kidneys into a convenient stomach packaging would have been a wonderful way to feed a group—while making sure no meat went to waste," Hungry History's "Ode to Haggis" online article says.

Haggis was very much criticized and ridiculed throughout most of the 18th century, perhaps because of the sickening idea of wrapping an animal inside its own stomach. But to be honest, it doesn't seem to be much different

from the mechanically-separated meat that consists of bones and the carcass of leftover chicken which is used to make the McNuggets I also claim to love.

When I arrived in Upstate New York for college, Russhell and I bonded over our love for chicken feet. When she was little, she wouldn't eat her mother's soup unless it was chicken feet soup. I learned from her that when Jamaicans don't make chicken feet in soup, they make them in curry. I appreciated that Russhell naturally understood my dislike for chicken breast, which seemed to always be tough and dry. I also found it to be too much meat at once; I missed the joy of sucking tender meat off bones and chewing on cartilage. Having to spend time sucking and spitting your food allows your tongue to savor the flavor for a longer time before you swallow.

One evening, Russhell invited me and a few other friends to her house for dinner. She cooked curry chicken, Jamaican style. It was too spicy for most of us to eat without having to chug a glass of water every five bites, but it was deeply flavorful, and satisfied me in a way that the salads and sandwiches I'd been having on campus could never do. I sucked on each chicken bone and piece of cartilage to make up for all the dry chicken breast I had to eat in my first weeks of college.

As I was savoring the last of my chicken, I caught sight of a piece of untouched bit of chicken on a friend's plate across from me. She had stopped eating, and I was not close enough to her back then to feel comfortable asking her whether she was going to eat the chicken or not.

"Are you going to eat that?" Russhell asked her, to my relief.

She hesitated and said, "I've never eaten anything with bone in it… How do you eat it?"

"You pick it up with your fingers," Russhell said in amusement.

Our friend gingerly picked up the chicken by one end of the bone between her dainty index finger and thumb and brought it up to her mouth. She opened her mouth wide to take a tiny bite out of the chicken with her front teeth—her mouth was wide open to avoid touching the bone with her lips. I drank my glass of water in silent judgment.

In Hong Kong, people who want the freshest ingredients shop at wet markets instead of supermarkets. The smell of wet markets is usually a strong mixture of blood, flesh, and fish, a pungent, sharp, metallic smell which we have a word for in Cantonese: 腥. Slimy pieces of raw flesh, feet, snouts, intestines, livers etc. hang from metal frames at the meat stands. The floors are always wet because the butchers hose the floors down to let the blood from the chopped-up-animals flow into the sewers. Live fish, with sizes ranging from a

child's hand to half an arm and colors all shades of metallic, splash water over the glass sides of the tanks they swim in.

Apart from being damp and smelly, wet markets are also noisy. Sellers are usually middle aged or old people with rough skin and voices. Some of them are plain rude, but some seem to be the kind of guardian who gives tough love. Sellers convince buyers that their products are at the best prices : 「俾你六蚊一斤喇，好冇？好抵啊！」("I'll give you a kilo for six dollars, okay? Such a good price!") During busy times, they yell out their lowest prices from their stands to attract customers, 「一蚊雞、兩蚊雞！」The familiar sounds, melodies, and rhythms of the wet market always intrigue me: the sound of customers bargaining, the sudden thud of butchers' huge, rectangular knives against thick wooden cutting boards as their bulky arms chop through meat and bone, the splashing of water and the flapping of tails when fish are taken out of their tanks, and the squeaks of Mom's wheely-cart.

Whenever I go to the wet market with Mom, I pull along her squeaky, two-wheeled, sack-like shopping cart behind me, and follow her around the market as she uses her supermom powers to scope out the cheapest and freshest-looking vegetables and meat. Mom likes to buy vegetables from a particular stand that is owned by an old man who packs our vegetables into bags in an almost unbearably slow manner, but she goes to him anyway because she feels sorry for his mental disability. Whenever we pass by other stores, sellers call out 「靚女！」("Pretty girl!"), a phrase that is not meant to be sexual at all. I find it endearing, even though it is a tactic to earn favor with customers. After a year of college in the States, I had learned to appreciate (and sometimes criticize) the lack of political correctness in Cantonese humor.

One morning, I saw half of a pig lying on the wet tiles next to a fresh pork stand in the wet market. It had been cut open laterally with all its pink, red, and brown organs still neatly fitted within the skin of the pig, like puzzle pieces on display for a lesson of anatomy. It was so early in the morning that most of the stands had not opened yet—my dad and I had a plane to catch, and we needed to pass through the wet market to get to our bus stop. The butcher of the pork stand had not yet picked out the organs to hang on the metal frames and chopped the half-pig into meat, feet, ears, and snout. I had an upset stomach that morning, and the sight of this once-alive sack of organs made it worse.

At least the wet market is honest. The sellers are humans rather than companies; they do not hide the sacrifice that was made for my carnivorous desires.

In the past decade, the number of slaughterhouses has decreased, while the consumption of meat has increased. The meat industry has discovered ways to

produce more meat without killing more animals. One way, is gluing cheap scraps of meat together with the enzyme transglutaminase, aka "meat glue," to form a prime cut. Transglutaminase is naturally found in blood clots, skin, and hair, but most TG in meat glue is made from the cultivation of bacteria using blood plasma from cows and pigs.

James Fortner runs the Queensland Natural Beef Company, an organization dedicated to using as few additives in meat as possible. In an interview, he exposes the secret of meat glue. The interview takes place in a large kitchen of a restaurant. On the counter in front of him is a plate of diced beef, each piece about half the size of a fist, and a bag of powder TG enzyme. Fortner and his interviewer both have masks on.

"Why've we got the masks on?" the interviewer asks, who is standing right next to Fortner opening the bag of powder TG.

"This is dangerous sh—," Fortner replies, the TV bleeping him out. He points his gloved index finger into the mouth of the bag. "See that?"

The interviewer chuckles, leans forward for half a second to peer into the white, powdery contents of the bag.

"Don't breathe that in."

The interviewer steps back instantly.

Cooked glued meat, or "frankenmeat," isn't necessarily dangerous to the average consumer, but when it is not cooked all the way through, the chances of food poisoning skyrocket. Outer parts of the original small scraps of meat are likely to have come in contact with a lot of bacteria on its way from the slaughterhouse to the kitchen, leading to a high chance of bacterial contamination for the frankenmeat.

While scraps of meat are saved to be puzzle pieces for prime cuts, animal heads are often saved in Hong Kong to ensure customers that the meat on their dish was fresh. Fish are cooked and served whole: and chicken, or duck, or geese heads are placed on the dish, telling the consumer yes, I am the fish, chicken, duck, or goose you are eating. Many people in the States shudder at the sight of animal heads on their plate—anything to remind them the meat was once an animal. Bones and eyes and fins and beaks tell you what you are eating. Eating eyes is especially a taboo in many other countries; perhaps because the eyes are supposedly the windows to the soul.

The thing about eating certain parts of an animal is that some parts resemble the whole animal way too much for the consumer's liking. A steak, a chicken fillet, a pork chop, or a piece of shark fin do not remind you of cows in a meadow, chicken or pigs on a farm, or sharks swimming in an ocean. We hate to admit that there was blood spilled for us, and that we continue to let it spill, simply to satisfy our taste buds. But some of us know the heads, the

lungs, the kidneys, the feet, and the bones of every animal we slay, and we treasure every part. Some of us look our food in the eyes, bones, and blood, and eat it for what it is.

Mom filled up the dinner table with plates of steamy dishes accompanied by bowls of fluffy, white rice. Long, dark green, stringy *tong choi* in fermented bean curd sauce (*fu yu*) that never fails to find its way into gaps between teeth, pork ribs, and shiitake mushrooms steamed in soy sauce, sesame oil, and fermented black bean made my mouth water. I snuck a piece of mushroom into my mouth before our family gathered at the table. In the middle of our meal, Mom took out the salt-and-pepper salmon heads from the oven. Janine and I looked at each other—it was our night to feast on fish eyes. We poked out the eyes with our chopsticks, the gooey ball balancing easily because of the stickiness. We sucked out the savory jelly from the eye, then spit out the small white eyeball and the thin outer transparent cartilage.

Our fish-eye phase lasted for a short period of time. I think its brevity was aided by how large the baked salmon heads were—their eyes so huge I grew nauseous at how much jello was in there. For a while, Janine had all the eyes she wanted until she grew sick of them too.

Dinner is the largest meal of the day, because it is generally viewed as the most important meal in Hong Kong. This is because it is usually the only meal of the day where the whole family gathers at the table to eat. When we are too full to sit in our apartment after a glorious home-cooked dinner, we take one of our post-dinner family walks in the malls below our apartment building. "When I was in college in Canada, I made pig's heart soup every day, because it was the cheapest thing to make." Dad brags about his poor college years as we walk through the overly-air-conditioned and sparkling clean hallways of the mall. He must be proud of being able to provide his family with so much more than just pig's heart soup.

In Hong Kong, the subway stations, the malls, and the building estates are all connected to one another by escalators, elevators, and indoor bridges. To go from our apartment down to the mall, we have to take two elevators—ones with marble floors and mirrors on three sides so that you can wave hi to infinite reflections of yourself waving back at you, and later realize with embarrassment that the security guard who had greeted you and opened the door for you was probably watching through the security camera.

After exiting the first elevator that takes us from the thirty-third floor down to the first floor, we walk past fountains, pillars, and plants. We arrive at the second elevator after passing a giant sparkling chandelier. The elevator then takes us from the main floor of the private building estate to the public

mall. This journey typically lasts about three minutes or so, unless we're waiting for Mom, who often takes 15 minutes just to leave the house.

Buildings develop vertically in Hong Kong because of the lack of space, hence all the escalators and elevators and over-fifty-floor apartment buildings. Space is precious in a city that is a dot on the map but is home to over seven million people. I was annoyed at how far apart everything was in American malls when I went to the States for college. Then again, I was also mesmerized by the vastness of stores and the variety of cereal- things that I can brag about to my friends in Hong Kong who have only tasted three kinds of cereals—.

"I'm so full," Janine moaned during one of our walks. She placed her small hand over her flat stomach and looked at her nonexistent food baby in the reflections of the store windows we walked past. "I'm going to burst."

As we walked across an indoor bridge that connected one mall to the next, we approached an ice cream store called Tezukuri No Mise. Across from it was another new ice cream store named Lab Made—the store sold ice cream that was frozen with liquid nitrogen in a lab visible to customers. Puffs of nitrogen gas floated out from the store, and the menus constantly emerged with new and sometimes intriguing flavors: bubble tea, durian, cereal milk, purple sweet potato, etc. The main attraction was getting to see the workers make the ice cream with fancy lab equipment amidst clouds of gas.

"That's so weird," I said to Janine, who was holding on to our youngest sister's arm like she was about to tear it off for no reason. "Why would people pay so much more simply for ice cream that is made in a lab?" Our youngest sister agreed with me, but the clouds from the ice cream lab were too alluring for Janine, who involuntarily pulled her towards the clouds, Janine's familiar clenched fingers around her arm.

While the nitrogen clouds summoned Janine, the low prices tacked onto the glass over Tezukuri's ice cream beckoned Mom. "It's so cheap!" Mom said, looking sheepishly at Dad. "Want some ice cream?"

Mom and my sisters ended up getting ice cream. Large scoops. I was a little disgusted at my family's gluttony, but I took a bite of their rum raisin and coffee ice cream anyway. A tiny part of me thought that my dad was the only one who deserved to have ice cream after dinner to make up for his pig heart soups in college, but people get what they don't deserve, and don't get what they deserve all the time.

In the summer after my sophomore year of college, my family and I took a trip to Cambodia for five days with a tour. Every meal we ate as a tour group was virtually the same, not much different from typical Chinese food —mushy eggplants, stir-fried greens, seaweed-fish-tofu soup, chicken, and white rice. Our tour guide, Ming, explained to us on the tour bus that these

were the safest dishes in Cambodia to eat, that if we ate "too local" there would be a higher chance of food poisoning.

Ming had bought a fried spider for anyone on the tour bus who was adventurous enough to try it. I snapped a picture of myself fake-eating the spider, dangling it in front of my mouth, squeezing the tip of one of its legs carefully between my thumb and index finger so that I wouldn't accidentally drop it onto my tongue if the bus were to jerk suddenly. A minute later, I was filming Dad eating the spider.

"Mmm, protein," I said to the camera.

"Tastes just like fried carbs," Dad said nonchalantly, chewing on a hairy leg.

"Ew! You better brush your teeth tonight, or else I'm not sleeping next to you!" Mom screeched for the whole bus to hear.

Our tour bus glided past children on the dusty streets, doing various activities: sitting idly on the muddy cracked ground, playing with a piece of garbage, helping an adult lift soda cans and bananas into the back of a wagon. I put my face against the large glass window, trying to get as close I could to these children.

It's the middle of a weekday, they should be in school, I thought. Suddenly, a dry lump formed in my throat and I held back tears I hadn't anticipated. I wanted these kids to go to school so badly. I told myself I could cry for them later when I would be back in Hong Kong, where my tears might actually be of use in bringing attention to these children.

Cambodia made me realize that being able to afford to eat the meat of a cow, or any meaty animal, was a privilege. During the massacre in Cambodia, a cow's life was worth more than a person's because of the labor a cow could provide. If a servant were to lose a cow or let it die, the servant's life was likely to be taken since the servant only lived to take care of the cow. We learned all of this from Ming, who had escaped the massacre himself and fled to Vietnam with strangers when he was seven. He told us about his family who were all either killed or went missing. He spoke of how he would sleep next to strangers on the ground on their way out of Cambodia, how they sometimes became corpses in the morning, how he drank water from puddles that the corpses had touched. After that, I never looked at the tradition of eating insects in the same way.

When I was fifteen, my dad and I went to a poor village in the mountains of Taipei for a mission trip with our church from Hong Kong. I was not mature enough to understand what doing missions meant personally to me, so one of the most memorable moments of that trip was the local pastor explaining how the walls of his house used to be only cement covered in newspapers.

He explained that large rats would sometimes run rampant underneath the newspapers at night, that he once got so annoyed at the rats during a meeting in the house, that he stuck a knife into the wall, and the wall bled through the newspaper.

We slept in that same house, but it was clearly in better shape than the time of the rat-spearing incident. The tin house was wide and short with tattered quilts, and cushions inside the living room for people to sit on. There were two large bedrooms with bamboo mattresses laid on the ground covered in quilts. The bathroom had a proper toilet bowl, but we showered with buckets of cold water. If someone was using the toilet inside the house, you would have to use the toilet next to the pig sty, where there was a single pink-and-black pig to accompany you with its indifferent grunting. I had to use the pig sty toilet once, and although I almost lost balance from the mixed smell of human and pig waste that so violently attacked me, hearing my oinking companion next door was a comfort.

The local pastor had his friends slaughter the pig for our last lunch in the village. It was the only pork we consumed. There were chickens running up and down the hills everywhere (in Chinese, we call them "running chicken," 走地雞), but the only owned animal in the village was the pastor's pig. I don't know whether I felt more touched or horrified at the fresh pork soup that was served to us, but I must have already gotten used to the idea of blood being spilt for me, because I ate the soup along with everyone else from my church.

What does it mean to eat every part of an animal? Cow foot stew emerged from Jamaican slaves who only received unwanted parts of the cow from their masters. Cambodians still don't really eat cow at all, because they need the labor the cow provides.

Chinese people eat shark fin soup to show off their high social status. It is commonly served in wedding banquets and at important gatherings. Cooked usually with chicken and ham broth (and probably a significant amount of MSG), shark fin is actually tasteless, but it gives the texture of vermicelli noodles, a texture that is common in Chinese soup ingredients.

The process of shark hunting is brutal. Fishermen cast out large nets that open up and close mechanically, trapping sharks in the thick, rough ropes that scratch against their shiny skin. The sharks are hauled up and dumped on deck. The fishermen start the fin-cutting process—knives slice through shark fins; streams of blood stain the salty, wet decks of the boat. Often times, the finless shark is dumped back into the ocean. Its finless body sinks to the bottom of the ocean, eyes and mind completely aware of its own unchangeable destiny. All that spilled blood, all those sunken carcasses at the bottom of the

ocean—all for the texture of rice noodles in soup consumed by people with gold watches and Gucci purses.

"I like it," my friend from Shen Zhen, China says, when I ask her about shark fin soup. "It tastes just like rice noodles."

In the Cambodian market, there are fried spiders, fried scorpions, and fried silkworms in large bamboo baskets in front of vendors who sit cross-legged behind their products. The market is dim because of the tin roof that shelters the two rows of vendors sitting across from one another. Customers walk in the middle between the two rows of vendors, sometimes bumping into a beggar/musician who has no legs, and is playing on his self-made ukulele-like instrument, sometimes children who ask for spare change. My family and I stay close together as we pass by the baskets of fried insects and spiders, taking pictures but not buying anything. We are intrigued by the dried fermented fish—Ming had told us that the fish were dried and fermented whole, along with all their organs. This was different from the dried fermented fish in Hong Kong; we would never eat its organs.

The main attraction is the roasted turtles. The turtles are stacked up on top of one another, three to four turtles in a column, their shells facing the ground. Their heads poke slightly out of their shell and only their paws are visible from the four holes in the shell. Their eyes are closed with a strange serenity. Like the many other tourists, I take out my camera to snap photos of the stacked turtles. One photo is not enough—I take a couple more, just in case the lighting in the first photo was bad.

The lady sitting cross-legged behind the turtles is silent. I cannot see her eyes because her wide, straw hat is covering them. She takes a white piece of cloth from her lap and lays it over the turtles, hiding them from my curious and ignorant eyes, eyes that I cannot hide.

A few weeks before I leave Hong Kong for America to continue my studies, Mom asks me what food I want her to make before I spend another year away from home. "Chicken feet soup," I say. I realize I'm eating chicken feet because I love to, not because I need to. I'm thankful, but not proud. Suddenly, chicken feet do not feel that much different from chicken nuggets; the only thing I can be proud of now is that I know what I am eating.